# Women & the U.S. Military in East Asia

## Key Points

- Negative effects of U.S. militarism on women and children in East Asia include sexual exploitation, physical and sexual violence, and the dire situation of many Amerasian children.
- Instead of seeing U.S. troops sent home and military bases closed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, East Asians have seen signs that the U.S. military is digging in deeper.
- The concept of security is too militarized and does not include the human rights of women and children and the protection of the physical environment.
- Despite reconciliation talks between North and South Korea, the U.S. has declared that it will maintain 100,000 troops in East Asia for the next 20 years even if the Koreas are reunited. Joint Vision 2020, a Pentagon planning document, concluded that Asia will replace Europe as the key focus of U.S. military strategy in the early 21st century and pointed to China as a potential adversary. Instead of seeing U.S. troops sent home and military bases closed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, East Asians have seen signs that the U.S. military is digging in deeper and that the cold war in the region continues, despite the lack of credible threats to the United States.
- The popular resentment——and especially the anger of many Asian women——at the U.S. military presence in East Asia was highlighted in a series of meetings and protests that occurred around the G8 Summit in Okinawa. Contributing to the focus of the U.S. military"s impact on women was another incident in Okinawa of sexual harassment a couple of weeks before the July 2000 Summit——this case involving a drunken Marine accused of molesting a 14-year-old schoolgirl while she slept in her home.
- Currently there are 37,000 U.S. military personnel in Korea and some 63,000 in Japan, including 13,000 on ships home-ported there. The islands of Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture of Japan, house 39 bases and installations (75% of all U.S. bases in Japan) although Okinawa is only 0.6% of the country"s land area. Stationed in Okinawa are 30,000 troops and another 22,500 family members.
- There were extensive U.S. bases in the Philippines until 1992. In 1991, the Philippine Senate voted against renewal of their leases. The U.S. subsequently proposed a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) to cover situations when U.S. troops are in the Philippines for joint exercises or shore leave. The VFA gives access to Philippine ports and airports on all the main islands for refueling, supplies, repairs, and rest & recreation ® & R)——

potentially far greater access than before, but under the guise of commercial arrangements and without the expense of maintaining permanent workforces and facilities. The VFA was ratified by the Philippine Senate in May 1999.

- Research conducted by a group called Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence shows that U.S. troops in Okinawa have committed more than 4,700 reported crimes since 1972, when Okinawa reverted to Japanese administration. Many of these were crimes of violence against women. In Korea, too, the number of crimes is high. A particularly brutal rape and murder of a barwoman, Yoon Kum Ee, in 1992 galvanized human rights advocates to establish the National Campaign for the Eradication of Crime by U.S. Troops in Korea in order to document these crimes and help victims claim redress.
- Violence against women is seriously underreported, due to the victims" shame and fear or their belief that perpetrators will not be apprehended. Women who work in the bars, massage parlors, and brothels near U.S. bases are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. The sexual activity of foreign-based U.S. military personnel, including (but not exclusively) through prostitution, has had very serious effects on women"s health, precipitating HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions, drug and alcohol dependency, and mental illness.
- In Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, Amerasian children born to women impregnated by U.S. troops are a particularly stigmatized group. They are often abandoned by their military fathers and raised by single Asian mothers. They live with severe prejudice and suffer discrimination in education and employment due to their physical appearance and their mothers" low status. Those with African-American fathers face even worse treatment than those having white fathers.
- Health effects linked to environmental contamination caused by military operations also need detailed investigation. In Okinawa, a 1996 report on babies born to women living near Kadena Air Force Base showed significantly lower birth weights than those born in any other part of Japan, attributable to severe noise generated by the base. At White Beach, a docking area for nuclear submarines, regional health statistics show comparatively high rates of leukemia in children and cancers in adults. In 1998, for example, two women from White Beach who were in the habit of gathering local shellfish and seaweed died of liver cancer.
- The drinking water from wells in the area of former Clark Air Force Base (Philippines) is contaminated with oil and grease. At 21 of the 24 locations where groundwater samples were taken, pollutants that exceeded drinking water standards were found, including mercury, nitrate, coliform bacteria, dieldrin, lead, and solvents. These contaminants

persist in the environment for a long time and bioaccumulate as they move up the food chain.

## Key Issues With Current U.S. Policy

- Military personnel are trained to dehumanize "others" as part of their training for war. Their pent-up frustration, aggression, and fear are absorbed by East Asian communities, especially women and children, through reckless driving, assaults, and military prostitution.
- The Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) between the U.S. and host governments ensure legal protection for U.S. bases and military personnel but do not adequately protect local communities from crime by U.S. troops. The U.S. accepts no legal responsibility for environmental cleanup of bases.
- In the eyes of host communities, U.S. troops stationed overseas often seem arrogant and insensitive. They usually know little about the country"s history and culture. They speak only English, pay their way with dollars, and live in spacious, fenced-off enclaves at higher standards than most local citizens.
- Military personnel are trained to dehumanize "others" as part of their preparation for war. This process, and the experience of combat, can make them edgy, fearful, frustrated, alienated, or aggressive——negative feelings that are often vented on host communities, especially women.
- Sexism is central to a militarized masculinity, which involves physical strength, emotional detachment, the capacity for violence and killing, and an appearance of invulnerability. Male sexuality is assumed to be uncontrollable and in need of regular release, so prostitution is built into military operations, directly or indirectly, with the agreement of host governments. Suzuyo Takazato of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, told the San Jose Mercury News, "These young troops go out into the field all day and are trained to be aggressive and to kill.... They may change out of uniform and into a T-shirt and jeans, but their attitude does not change."
- Although the military has a policy of "zero tolerance" for sexual violence and harassment, and most military personnel do not violate women, this is an officially recognized problem in U.S. military families, for women in the military, and in communities near bases in this country and overseas. Military leaders often attribute it to a few "bad apples," but these incidents happen far too often to be accepted as aberrations. Women organizers see them as systemic——an integral part of a system of military violence.
- Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) vary depending on host country laws and each government"s power and willingness to negotiate terms. For example, the SOFA

between the U.S. and Germany includes more detailed procedures for jurisdiction over personnel who commit crimes than do SOFAs with Japan or Korea. It also commits the U.S. military to cooperating in finding fathers and advising them to pay child support to German women who have children by U.S. troops, a provision completely absent from the SOFAs with Japan or Korea, and from the VFA with the Philippines. Host governments are in different power positions in relation to the U.S., though none of them come to SOFA negotiations as equal partners with the United States.

- SOFAs are based upon dysfunctional assumptions about national security. They ensure legal protection for U.S. bases and military personnel but do not provide genuine security for local communities, nor do they assure the security of the American people.
- Although U.S. officials claim to have implemented adequate procedures for dealing with crimes against people in host communities, U.S. troops are not always tried by local courts, even when cases involve serious injury or death. It took enormous public outcry before those responsible for abducting and raping a 12-year-old Okinawan girl in September 1995 were handed over to Japanese authorities, stood trial in a Japanese court, and began serving seven-year sentences in Japan. In other cases where local people know of punishment, it is often trivial. Sometimes perpetrators are moved beyond reach to another posting, perhaps back to the United States.
- SOFAs (including the VFA) make no reference to Amerasian children, who are often abandoned by their fathers. No government takes responsibility for the dire situation of these children, who have no legal standing in the United States. The 1982 Amerasian Immigration Act, which sought to address the situation of Vietnamese Amerasian children, does not cover people born in Japan or the Philippines. To qualify under this act, one must be born between 1951 and 1982. One must also have documentation that the father is a U.S. citizen, formal admission of paternity, and a financial sponsor in the United States.
- Environmental contamination affects whole communities but is most significant for women and children, because they tend to show signs of disease earlier than men. Militaries cause more pollution than any other institutions. Bases store fuel, oil, solvents, and other chemicals as well as weapons, including defoliants like Agent Orange, depleted uranium-tipped bullets, and nuclear weapons. The SOFAs with Japan and Korea do not hold the U.S. responsible for the cleanup of contamination.
- In the Philippines, records of environmental contamination were incomplete and unavailable to concerned nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for several years. Studies——both by the People's Task Force for Bases Cleanup and by environmental consultants——show that the U.S. military did not follow its own guidelines on cleanup. In Okinawa, community leaders are trying to get information about contamination and

assurances that the U.S. will take responsibility for cleanup, even though the SOFA with Japan explicitly excludes this. In both the Philippines and Okinawa, women are gathering information from local people who have worked on the bases or who live nearby.

- Host governments have downplayed contamination or denied its existence for fear of fueling antibase sentiment (Korea) or deterring prospective investors (Philippines). Environmentally induced illnesses may not be apparent for many years, and it is difficult to establish a clear cause-and-effect relationship. Determined efforts by NGOs, researchers, and some elected Philippine officials, as well as deaths of children born in contaminated areas have at last resulted in official recognition of the existence of military contamination in the Philippines.

Written by Gwyn Kirk, Rachel Cornwell, and Margo Okazawa-Rey. For more information on how you can resist having your tax dollars go towards supporting violence against women in the Third World, contact the East Asia-U.S. Women's Network Against U.S. Militarism, 353 – 30th St., San Francisco, CA 94131; Voice: (415) 550-7947; Fax: (415) 550-7947. Email: gwyn@igc.org or mor@sfsu.edu.

## Other Resources:

Organizations

Asia-Pacific Center for Justice and Peace
110 Maryland Av. NE, Ste. 504
Washington DC 20002
Voice: (202) 543-1094
Fax: (202) 546-5103
Email: apcjp@igc.org
Website: http://www.apcjp.org/
Contact: Rachel Cornwell

Buklod Center
23 Rodriguez St., Mabayuan
Olongapo City 2200
Philippines
Fax: (63) 47-223-5826
Contact: Alma Bulawan

Du Rae Bang (My Sister's Place)
13/1 116 Kosandong
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Voice: (82) 351-841-2609
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Voice: (415) 550-7947
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National Campaign to Eradicate Crime by U.S. Troops in Korea
Rm 307, Christian Building
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Saeng-yun 4 dong 541-39 11/4
Dongduchon City
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Voice:(82) 351-867-4655
Fax:(82) 351-867-3031
Contact: Hyun Sun Kim

WEDPRO
14 Maalalahanin St.
Teachers Village, Diliman
Quezon City 1101

Philippines
Fax: (63) 2 921-7053
Email: wedpro@qinet.net
Contact: MarÍa Carisa Lamar

## Anti-Militarism Resources

In the Wake of the Plane Crash Assaults

Palestine Points of Unity

Statement of Solidarity

Anti-War Stickers & Flyers

The Algebra of Infinite Justice

INCITE! Supports the Palestinian Call for BDS: Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions of Israel

Women & the U.S. Military in East Asia

## Download Postcard (PDF) to Support Palestine!

INCITE!
Supports the Palestinian call for BDS: Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions of Israel.
For more information and direct actions, please go to:
http://www.bdsmovement.net
http://www.pacbi.org
http://www.usacbi.org
INCITE!
INCITE! Women and Trans People of Color Against Violence is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women and trans people of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue and grassroots organizing.
www.incite-national.org

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